

ADDRESS BY ROYAL PROFESSOR UNGKU A. AZIZ
VICE CHANCELLOR UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA
AT THE SYMPOSIUM ON HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY
OF SCIENCE IN COMMEMORATION OF 1000TH ANNIVERSARY OF IBN SINA

Mr. Chairman

Y.B. Dato Mohd Najib bin Tun Abdul Razak
Deputy Minister of Education, Malaysia

Your Excellencies

The Dean of Science

Learned participants and observers,

Ladies and Gentlemen

I welcome you to this Symposium. I pray that the time and energy you have sacrificed to respond to our invitation will be adequately rewarded. I welcome you to Malaysia and particularly to the University of Malaya. The organisers of the Symposium, including myself, will do our best to make your stay fruitful and pleasant.

We are gathered here to pay academic homage to a man who lived a thousand years ago. The sponsors of this Symposium are united in their awe of the greatness of this man. They are also conscious of what seems to be a rather faint reaction on the part of the Islamic world as a whole and an even weaker response in the global network of learning to his 1000th Anniversary.

Now we are here and you are here. While I do not need to say any more about why we are here, I do hope you will kindly indulge me by allowing me to speculate as to why Ibn Sina deserves a more positive acknowledgement today.

However before doing so, please may I thank the committee and sub committee who have organised this Symposium and the donors who have made it possible as well as the workers of the University especially those who have helped to mount the exhibition that we will see shortly.

I shall take as my general line the question, if Ibn Sina were alive today, what would be his place in our world?

I shall begin at the beginning. It is said that he was born in 370 Hijrah or 980 A.D. His father came from Balkh which is a city in the northern part of present day Afghanistan. His mother came from Bukhara which is now in the Soviet Socialist Republic of Uzbekistan. His father became the Governor of Kharmaithan which is not far from Bukhara.

Our first impression therefore is of a person from the region of the Amu Daria river. When Ibn Sina was young besides learning the Koran, he was able to study widely and deeply in the splendid library of the Samanid Emir, Nuh Ibn Mansur. He had read the whole collection by the time he was eighteen.

In my humble view, here we see two key aspects of Ibn Sina: Perception and Memory which account for his powerful intellect. The breadth of his learning was clear from an early age. His range of scholarly interests extended from philosophy, physics, astronomy, music, mathematics to medicine or healing in all its aspects. He could truly be given the accolade of polymath. His mastery of language is evident in his own Persian and in the Arabic he learned. This is further proof of his great intellect.

And now if he were living in this era of the 1980's, how would he stand?

Honours would be showered upon him. If Linus Pauling could win two Noble Prizes, how many would suit Ibn Sina?

How many royal and national academies would offer him fellowship?
How many universities would bestow Honorary Degrees upon him and try to attract him with comfortable visiting professorships?

Nevertheless, today as was the case one thousand years ago, man cannot live by honours alone. He needs some material wealth. From his books and publications alone Ibn Sina would have been quite well off. He was a prolific writer. One hundred and thirty one works are attributed to him. These include the Qanun Fi'l Tibb (Qanun of Medicine) and the Kitab Al Shifa.

His books were translated and reprinted throughout the Renaissance.

As an outstanding physician, he could claim fabulous consultation fees, especially from the oil rich gentlemen who now converge on Harley Street or Boston or Houston.

It is likely that he would seriously be considered for the post of Director General of UNESCO or the Rectorship of the United Nations University: both of which he would be well advised to avoid.

Since he was occasionally involved in affairs of state and since he was a poet in his own right, he might have followed the footsteps of President Senghor of Senegal and be the President of a newly independent state. Indeed, he was such a poet as to be regarded a Master by another genius from those parts, Omar Khayam. It is Ibn Sina who created the philosophical rubaiyat as a form of expression.

Even Chaucer refers to Avicenna in the Prologue where he tells us that, the Doctor was a "perfect practising physician". All his apothecaries in a tribe were ready with drugs.....He was well versed in "Avicenna"... and thirteen others including Galen and Razes.

He was the great assimilator as well as innovator. This is the man who integrated Greek science and Islamic science and created an effective system of medicine that was used not only in the Islamic world of his time but also in the following era up to the seventeenth century. His books were reference texts in the universities of Europe and he was famous from Italy to Sweden.

What shall I, a non-student of medicine, select for brief mention on this occasion? Perhaps two aspects of his writings seem interesting,

Firstly, I would mention the synergetic influence of the mind with the body especially in health and in sickness. He clearly recognized the psychosomatic aspects of health and the closely interacting relationship between the mind and the brain.

Secondly, he emphasized the importance of exercise, long before the current craze of jogging, of which I confess I am an addict, and its beneficial effects on health and the process of aging.

He was a precursor of the concept of preventive medicine which is now so popular.

I could go on quoting to you the merits of Ibn Sina but I am sure you will do this much better yourselves during the next three days and so I will desist. I am merely trying to show you why we are so happy to be the host to this Symposium which celebrates the One Thousandth Anniversary of Ibn Sina.

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